

How and Why I Became Jewish

**by
Bill Batkay**

I am virtually the only Jew I know who was actually born in the Jewish Alps, as the Catskills were known among people of a certain age. I just didn't happen to be Jewish when I was born there. I was born in 1944 into a predominantly Roman Catholic family of German, Hungarian, and Irish descent. I became Jewish in the literal sense in my mid-30s when I went through the formal conversion process required by the Jewish Conservative Movement. However, I think I was over-determined to convert because I was surrounded by Jews and *yiddishkeit* practically from birth.

For starters, I came into this world in Maimonides Hospital, named after the famed medieval Spanish Jewish philosopher-physician, in Liberty, New York, a mile or two up the road from the famed Grossinger's Hotel, the flagship of the area's Jewish hotels. Moreover, I was delivered and medically circumcised by a Jewish doctor. Then, too, many, of the businesses in Livingston Manor, New York, where I spent my earliest years, were run by Jews, like Hymie (no disparagement intended, that's what everybody called him) Schwartz, who owned the pharmacy. Most tellingly, my mother's youngest sister, my Aunt Jean, was sweet on a "Jewish fella" (the standard

upstate term) who owned the local airport. Between my visits to the airport with my aunt, and his regular appearance at family gatherings, I came to hero-worship this Albert Gottlieb who eventually became my Uncle “Put” when he married my aunt.

But the clearest indication that something Jewish was percolating within me occurred when an adolescent friend and I were walking down the main street in Glen Rock, our town in Bergen County, New Jersey, sometime during my early teenage years. As we passed the candy store we frequented I noticed a paperback book displayed in the window: Leon Uris's recently-published *Exodus*. I'd never heard of it, but the cover blurb and picture looked intriguing. I turned to my friend and asked if he knew anything about the book. He told me it was the story in fictional form of the creation of the State of Israel. Fascinated, I later that week went back to the store, bought the book, and read it compulsively in about a week. I became a Zionist on the spot.

In the next few months I devoured everything I could find in the local library about the history of Israel. I even bought a little book called *Hebrew Through Pictures* to try to teach myself the language, to the bemusement of a Jewish co-worker of my father's. For reasons known only to God, that was

as far as my proto-Jewish consciousness took me.

Indeed, I soon suppressed even that when, following a class presentation by a Maryknoll father in my senior year of Catholic high school, I decided to become a Maryknoll priest. I applied to the college at Glen Ellyn, was accepted, and began my studies in September 1961. Still, what Yiddish speakers refer to as *dos pintele yid* (a little spark of Jewishness) must have squirreled itself away in my soul. For on the first occasion I went into Chicago, which we seminarians could do twice a year, I dragged one of the guys I was with to an Orthodox synagogue recently built in the Loop. After looking at the already-famous stained glass window, I talked one of the officials into opening the Ark and letting me kiss one of the Torah scrolls. Before we left, I even bought a prayer book from the gift shop. On the train ride back to GE, I scribbled my name inside the cover of the book, which still sits on my bookshelf among the dozens of Jewish religious books I've acquired since. Coming full circle, 10 years after my conversion in 1981, I attended Sabbath morning services at the very same synagogue during a visit to Chicago for an academic conference.

I had left Maryknoll at the end of spring 1963 and thought no more of my earlier interest in Judaism until circumstances aligned to lead me to

convert formally and, simultaneously, join the Conservative synagogue in Montclair, New Jersey.

What happened was this: sometime in the late 1970s, a few years after I started teaching at Montclair State College, I met and eventually married a colleague who was Jewish. She herself was unobservant and not involved in Jewish life, although an uncle of hers was a prominent Conservative rabbi and his wife an active leader in the Women's League for Conservative Judaism.

At about that time, I found out that another colleague at Montclair State, whom I had come to know, was the president of Shomrei Emunah, the synagogue in Montclair. In addition, the rabbi of the congregation was a seminary classmate of a close cousin of my wife's. To complete the organizational trifecta, the president of Shomrei's sisterhood was a colleague of my wife's aunt at the Women's League. By 1981, my family background and these serendipitous links to Shomrei Emunah drew me to become a Jew in fact, instead of merely in fantasy.

William M. Batkay

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